

Jo Ji Juku Go

Children in Japan and China are exposed from an early age to sayings such as these. Some of Japan's four-character compounds (四字熟語, *yo-ji-juku-go*) depict personality types and human predicaments; others--like 自業自得 above--are wisdom-dispensing proverbs. The ability to effortlessly inject these zingers into spoken and written communications is one of the marks of a well-educated Japanese person. Students formally study four-character compounds beginning in junior high school, and later do battle with the more obscure ones on exams for university entrance and employment.

Many of Japan's proverbs (e.g.: 猿も木から落ちる "Even monkeys fall from trees") are written in sentence form, but the pithy four-kanji variety is comprised only of Chinese characters, with no kana interspersed. While some are homegrown, many four-kanji sayings used in Japan today-- like the kanji of which they are composed-- were imported from China, where they survive as part of the modern language there, as well.

●外柔内剛 がいじゅうないごう

To be gentle on the outside but tough on the inside

外見はもの柔らかに見えるが、内面はしっかりしていて、芯が強いこと。

A person who is soft and gentle in appearance while at the same time having a tough, strong-minded side

彼女は外柔内剛で奥さんにするには、ぴったりの人だと思います。

She is **gentle on the outside but tough on the inside**. I'm sure she will make a suitable wife for you.

●無芸大食 むげいたいしよく

Someone whose only talent is eating./an unaccomplished person

大食をするほかに何の取り柄もないこと。また、そのような人。

To have no special talent besides the ability to eat a lot, or that kind of person

あいつの無芸大食には、全くあきれられるよ。

We are astounded at his **lack of accomplishments**.

25 Four-Kanji Sayings (Japanese and Chinese)

Japanese

1. 和魂洋才 (Japan-spirit-Western-genius, *wa-kon-you-sai*)

To learn European civilization, but at the same time not to forget Japanese culture.

2. 螳螂之斧 (praying mantis'-ax, *tourou-no-ono*)

(originally from Chinese) Pointless resistance. The small mantis, with its axe-shaped front legs, tries to oppose a chariot.

3. 尊王攘夷 (revere-emperor-expel-barbarian, *son-nou-jou-i*)

Revere the Emperor and expel the barbarians. (Meiji Era slogan)

4. 手前味噌 (hand-in front of-soybean paste, *te-mae-miso*)

Soybean paste made by one's own hand. (Self-praise is no recommendation).

5. 適材適所 (right-lumber-right-place, *teki-zai-teki-sho*)

The right lumber in the right place. (The right person for the right task).

6. 他山之石 (another-mountain's-rock, *ta-zan-no-ishi*)

A rock from another mountain. (Good advice from an unnoticed quarter).

7. 大器晚成 (big-skill-late-develop, *tai-ki-ban-sei*)

(originally from Chinese) Great talents mature late. (Said of a late bloomer).

8. 醉生夢死 (drunk-life-dream-die, *sui-sei-mu-shi*)

Live drunk, die dreaming. (Live a debauched life).

9. 酒池肉林 (*sake-pond-flesh-woods, shu-chi-niku-rin*)

A pond filled with wine and a woods filled with flesh. (To have an orgy).

10. 士農工商 (samurai-agriculture-craft-business, *shi-nou-kou-shou*)

The four principal classes of pre-modern Japan (Samurai, farmers, artisans and merchants)

11. 晴耕雨讀 (clear sky-plant-rain-read, *sei-kou-u-doku*)

Work the fields on a fine day, study on a rainy day.

12. 才子多病 (clever-person-many-sick *sai-shi-tai-byou*)

Too wise to live long.

13. 龍頭蛇尾 (dragon-head-snake-tail, *ryuu-tou-da-bi*)

The head of a dragon, the tail of a snake. (Something that turns out to be inconsequential).

14. 老少不定 (elderly-a few-not-determined, *rou-shou-fu-jou*)

Death keeps no calendar. (One might live to be elderly or only have a few years on earth).

15. 傍目八目 (outsider-eye-eight-eye, *oka-me-hachi-moku*)

The onlooker sees eight moves ahead. (Superior observation by an outsider).

16. 面從腹背 (face-follow-belly-back, *men-juu-fuku-hai*)

Obedience on one's face but betrayal in one's heart.

17. 明鏡止水 (bright-mirror-correct-water, *mei-kyou-shi-sui*)

To have a clear conscience.

18. 君子豹變 (wise man-leopard-change, *kunshi-hyou-hen*)

The wise man changes (suddenly) like the spots on a leopard.

19. 馬耳東風 (horse-ear-east-wind, *ba-ji-tou-fu*)

In one ear and out the other. (When spring winds begin to blow from the east, people are happy, but horses are totally unaffected).

20. 器用貧乏 (skillful-poor, *kiyou-binbou*)

Skillful, yet poor.

Chinese

21. 人心難測 (person-heart-difficult-fathom)

The human heart is difficult to fathom.

22. 衣錦夜行 (clothing-brocade-night-go)

Dressed in the finest brocades to parade in the dark of night. (Not being able to show the people at home that one has made good).

23. 裹足不前 (behind-feet-no-forward)

Binding your feet to prevent your own progress.

24. 指鹿為馬 (point-deer-turn into-horse)

Pointing to a deer and calling it a horse.

25. 人心歸漢 (person-heart-return-China)

The hearts of the people belong to Han (China).

Sources

Taiji Takashima, *Fountain of Japanese Proverbs*, Hokuseido Press, 1981

Adeline Yen Mah, *A Thousand Pieces of Gold: A Memoir of China's Past Through Its Proverbs*, HarperCollins, 2002.

List submitted by Laurence Wiig

For more four-character compounds, visit [here](#).